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THE IMPORTANCE
OF A
POSITIVE AND DISTINCT THEOLOGY;
A DISCOURSE,

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DISCOURSE.

“My words shall be of the uprightness of my heart, and my lips shall utter knowledge clearly.”—JOB xxxiii: 3.

The text embodies the two conditions of all useful and serious speech—frankness and honesty of heart, clearness and thoroughness of knowledge: “My words shall be of the uprightness of my heart, and my lips shall utter knowledge clearly.” This uprightness of heart and clearness of knowledge, are very intimately connected in religious utterance. Indistinctness of thought leads to carelessness of speech; indolence in forming accurate opinions, to indifference to truth as an intellectual possession, and finally as a moral obligation. This is just as true of theological opinions as of any others, and it is illustrated in the condition of the church in our own day, which is marked alike by carelessness in forming opinions, and disingenuousness in expressing them.

The last ten years have been distinguished by a general lull of theological controversy. The whole Christian Church has, in respect of its internal strifes, been lying upon its arms. The violent

disputes, touching church government, between Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists; touching doctrine, between Calvinists and Arminians; touching rites and forms, between Close and Open-Communicants, pedo-Baptists and other Baptists; touching fundamentals, between Orthodox and Liberals—all these once angry and absorbing strifes, have subsided into a general toleration, or at least a mutual indifference. The respectable judgment of society seems to be this, that *many men* will have *many minds* upon religion as well as other subjects; that theological sects match constitutional temperaments and providential circumstances; and that it were as well to insist upon unanimity of tastes, views and customs, in regard to politics, literature and society, as in regard to modes of worship and articles of faith. The leading religious teachers of the day have taken advantage of this cessation of theological controversy, to direct the batteries of their ridicule and the shafts of their contempt against what, when we are speaking depreciatively, are called dogmas; when we are speaking more respectfully, are called doctrines—the two words really meaning the same thing. Such a torrent of general suspicion and abuse, as the so-called dogmas of the Christian church have encountered from their own professed adherents, is really a curious phenomenon of the times. Certainly the formal and avowed antagonists of the old theology have been far behind its formal and avowed friends, in the efforts made to bring all that is definite and distinctive of the system into

neglect and disrepute. The orthodox pulpit of the day is not less distinguished than the heterodox, for the stress it lays upon the practical application of Christianity to private and social life; and we are told that nothing marked the late religious revival throughout the country, so much as the designed or accidental absence of doctrinal statements.

This amiable state of things, whatever else it may do, does not favor the adoption of Job's language—"My words shall be of the uprightness of my heart, and my lips shall utter knowledge clearly."

A state of complacent indifference to *opinions* in respect to theology—the greatest of all sciences—the science of man's relations to God; a state of pleasant divorce between religious thought and religious practice, is, it will occur to most sober minds, not a state which can long continue, or which has anything absolute to recommend it. The popular way of stating the religious creed of Christendom, that theology which has become fixed and rigid through age and use, may indeed have become so poor an expression of the actual feelings of Christians, as to deserve little but indifference and neglect. When men, not having courage to throw aside their out-grown church clothes, as an eccentric writer calls theological formulas, and to order new ones, are still conscious that these tattered garments lend them no warmth and decency, it is not strange that they should enter into a disparagement of all doctrinal attire. But it is well to understand that it is *their way* of thinking, not thinking itself—their *own* doctrines, not doctrine itself—which is really

worthy of this contempt and disuse. And the time must come, when the vital and eternal connection between doctrine and practice, between theological opinion and religious feeling and conduct, will indicate itself with as much earnestness as ever. The present contemptuous feeling in respect to the importance of distinctions of thought in regard to the gravest and most practical of subjects—man's relations to God—is one of the most temporary and superficial sentiments that ever characterized an historical period; and those who hail it as an indication of more reality and practical efficiency in religion, might just as well hail a decline in the study of astronomical science as an evidence of the increasing safety of practical navigation.

No commentary, however, upon the errors and decay of popular theology, could be so decisive, as the power it has had to make theology itself offensive and nauseous. When men, to get rid of thinking upon the authoritative bases of their own churches, are led to disparage thinking itself, to get away from the doctrines which underlie their own religious faith and practices, are compelled to make light of all definite opinions, it is a most decisive proof that the necessities of the human heart and the experience of the human mind, demand a great revisal of theology. It is to avoid a confession of error—it is to postpone a great revolution in theology—it is to escape the necessity of a stern and painful re-investigation of truth, that this waiving of the whole matter of opinion as trivial and unpractical, is resorted to.

It is more unaccountable, however, that those who have once achieved for themselves a clear and consistent doctrinal system, should fall into the trap of indifference to opinions. And yet certainly the clearest and strongest thinking of the liberal body was done; the most decisive and useful discriminations, the best doctrinal tracts, the most consistent and complete statements of theological truth, were made, in our Unitarian fold, five and twenty years ago. Since that time, we have had a great deal of vague speculation, but a very small addition to definite and demonstrated truth; and indeed, many of the questions then accurately investigated and settled, are now debated even by our own clergy, in a seeming ignorance of what has been done by those who went before them, and with a far less able and conscientious handling of the topics revived, than theirs was. Unitarians are found almost as ignorant of their own views, as their opponents are.

The relaxation of orthodoxy has occasioned a softening in all the muscles of liberal Christianity, as if, because doctrinal error slumbered, doctrinal truth might doze; as if the only use of truth were to fight error with, not to live in and thrive on! The consequence has been as great a defection from truth among liberals, as among legalists.

Make light of opinion; allow it to be said that it matters not what men believe, if they are only sincere—that religion is a matter of the heart, theology of the head, and that we may properly stop up the communication between them—and you have announced the carnival of falsehood; you have invited

all sorts of private notions and fancies, wild speculations and personal caprices, to come and occupy the Castle of Indolence into which you have turned the Temple of Truth. Thereupon, all fine discriminations, all vivid outlines, the pains-taking accuracies of truth, are blurred over and lost. Men begin to mix up their knowledge and their guesses, their reflections and their fancies, their intellect and their passions. They confound imagination and fancy, reason and understanding, conscience and will, affection and passion, until they come to call anything true, that they wish to be true—anything good that they like—any thing virtue, anything religion, that is bold enough to claim the name.

There is, perhaps, very little to choose, at the present moment, between the obscurities of orthodoxy and the obscurities of liberalism. It would oftentimes seem, indeed, as if, in the mists of general indifference to truth, the parties had shifted sides and exchanged uniforms, so common is it to hear the most liberal sentiments from the most orthodox quarters, and the most orthodox from the most liberal. It makes it impossible for modern Jobs to say, “My words shall be of the uprightness of my heart, and my lips shall utter knowledge clearly.” We may, in certain respects, rejoice in this inconsistency as the harbinger of better times, but it certainly reveals an astonishing indifference to clear thinking, and whatever we may think of the necessary progress of the times, be sure that this indifference and obscurity touching the exact truth, which may seem to promise the flight of old and effete dogmas,

is more dangerous to our prospects than it is to those of orthodoxy. Rigid and exact thinking, sound and clear logic, sharp discrimination, were the original weapons, and they are the permanent armory of our cause; while we used them, we advanced rapidly; when we abandoned them, we stopped, and continuing to abandon them, we shall retreat. Orthodoxy can afford to sleep for a generation upon her creed; and allow it to go even into temporary desuetude. For, founded as it was upon the coarser fears and hopes of our nature, supported by the external and literal sense of much of the Scripture, stamped upon the art and the past history of the world, identified with the architecture, literature and language of ages, it can at any time arouse itself, appeal to a thousand seeming witnesses of its authority, summon the original passions and weaknesses on which it was founded to its defence, and re-install its creed in the minds and mouths of men. Catholicism, itself, has almost recovered from the Reformation, and now, not idly boasts her superiority over Protestantism in popularity and success. It is the constant superiority which superstition, that drifts with the tide, has over reason, which makes against the current. In times of indifference to truth, of sluggish materialism or political pre-occupation, of anarchy and unrest, however for the moment both ecclesiastical rule and dogmatic tyranny may disappear, the materials for their re-appearance in new vigor, are always accumulating. Those materials are unenlightened fears and hopes, sensual feelings and habits, vague opinions and un-

settled convictions. We may ascribe the revival of Catholicism to the langour of Protestant thought in theological directions, to the pre-occupation of the Nineteenth Century with social and political questions, and to the reaction upon the general scepticism left by the age of the French Revolution. It would not surprise me, nay I expect it, if the generation of a seemingly decayed, but only a drowsy orthodox theology, on the verge of which we stand, were to be followed by a re-assertion of Trinitarian and Calvinistic doctrines in as positive and offensive forms, as the world has ever seen. Indeed, what do we hear now, when ordinary indifferents to theological distinctions venture to express a theological opinion, but bolder and coarser statements of theology, than the world has heard for centuries! I venture to say that the late description of the Godhead of Jesus Christ, in a celebrated letter on Fellowship with Errorists, has never been equalled in crudity and unintentional blasphemy; and further than this, that in an age ignorant and indifferent to theology, its blasphemy will not be extensively appreciated or seriously disrelished. We must expect such monstrous opinions to stalk forth in the mists of this murky, steaming ignorance of theology, of which we are so proud—the offspring of the heart, when it dares to dissever itself from the head, and set up creed-making on its own account.

I am well aware that in pleading the worth and the necessity of theological distinctness, of uprightness of heart and clearness of knowledge, in the utterance of theological opinions, it will be at

once inquired whether the old polemics are to be revived, and the starved souls of men to be fed on the husks of controversial divinity ; whether or no, it seems desirable to bring men, women and children together, in need of humility, chastening, consolation, moral elevation, and spiritual quickening, to listen to discussions on the trinity, and the atonement, election and predestination, or whether infants or adults are the proper subjects for baptism? This is a question not for us, but for those who believe these doctrines ; and a very serious question it is for them. If these are really the doctrines of Christianity, and if the Gospel is to be taught at all, then these *are* the proper subjects of Christian preaching, and if they are not profitable, Christianity is not profitable. For the doctrines of any system, art, science or policy, that is, the fundamental truths on which it rests, are and ever must be the most essential and the most profitable things to think about and to talk about, if the system be a true and important system. The statesman cannot think, the patriot cannot speak, of the doctrines of a republican and democratic government, too often or too urgently. The artist cannot study, nor discuss too seriously the doctrines of color, form and perspective, which underlie his noble vocation. The astronomer cannot investigate, nor display and popularize the doctrines of his science too carefully, if he would bring it forward. And is it only Christianity whose doctrines are to be regarded as non-essential, barren and intrusive? Is it only religion, about which men need to know nothing fundamentally, clearly,

systematically? Or, has science, art, government, commerce, society, costume—everything, in short—its original principles, its essential doctrines, while Christianity has none, or none worth speaking of? If doctrinal preaching has degenerated into mere controversial preaching; if the popular creeds are no longer welcomed or deemed instructive in the popular churches, it is indeed high time to inquire whether they really do fitly represent and embody the fundamental principles of Christianity; in short, whether they *are* the doctrines of the Gospel! That they are not so, and that the heart of the *world* feels this before its intellect is prepared to acknowledge and establish the fact, I am fully convinced. But I hold the inference, which is drawn from the unpopularity and non-essential character of the church dogmas, that *no* dogmas of Christianity are true or important, or that Christianity has *no* doctrines, a very illogical and mischievous inference. Christianity need not be revealed *as* a system, in order to be a system; it need not have its doctrine about God, or about Christ, or about man, or about morals, or about piety, specifically stated on the pages of the New Testament as doctrine, in order to make it possible, and binding on men, to deduce from its general drift, and a studious examination and comparison of its scattered teachings, what its fundamental and essential principles are.

We have created from the observation and study of the universe, a system of Natural Theology; we have proved the Being of a God, his attributes and character, from the comparison of nature and man,

and nobody doubts the importance of a systematic acquaintance with Natural Theology, or the reality of the thing itself, because it is not printed in starry letters on the sky, nor chaptered and versed in the flowers of the field! Why then should we imagine that the Christian Theology, the doctrines of the New Testament, are not important, or not intended to be fathomed and known and used as the great instruments of faith, because confessedly they do not exist in the pages of the Bible, in the form in which they stand in the Westminster Catechism. If the Westminster, or any other Catechism, were a successful compilation, abstract or codification of the New Testament, it would be invaluable, and worth all the study and belief we could bring to it.

It is only because that doctrinal statement is unsatisfactory; is a prejudiced, partial and even false account of the Gospel system, that we repudiate it, and that the Christian world is nearly ready to do so. But that another statement must be made, earnestly taught, and patiently learned—in short that an intellectual account of the contents, the fundamentals, the drift and method of Christianity, must be prepared and commended to men, if we hope to produce in them the fruits of faith, or to give them the supports and consolations of belief and knowledge, I hold to be very certain.

I am not saying now *what* the doctrines of the Gospel are. I simply insist that it has doctrines! Do you assert, on the contrary, that it is a spirit; that it commends a certain temper and frame of mind? Very well. Then let us have a doctrine

of this spirit. What is this spirit? how is it to be invited? from whence does it come? how is it to be secured? how known and tested? how communicated? Let us know definitely all that can be discovered and said of the laws of this spirit, and call that the Doctrinal system of the Gospel. But I confess, that I consider this very language that Christianity is a spirit merely, an indication and proof of the vague and indefinite way of thinking prevailing among those who have broken from the popular creeds. Christianity is, or pretends to be, a revealed religion. It has a history, true or fictitious, real or mythical. That its history has been as real as any history for seventeen hundred years, or thereabouts, is admitted everywhere; that its early history, that is for the first hundred years, is obscure and inferential in part, is not denied here. But that the solidest and most careful minds the world has produced since, have been compelled to concede, and been rejoiced to acknowledge, the credibility of its chief records and its own account of itself, is equally undeniable. Are then the study and acceptance of the four Gospels; first to be satisfied of their claims to belief, and next to see what a magnificent and sublime fact they assert,—*i. e.*, that God has revealed himself in a revelation supplementary to nature and the soul, to man's understanding and affections—are these definite things which are to be done and known in regard to the Gospel, vague, misty generalities, or are they sober, positive facts? I can understand and respect an honest man's denial after examination of the fact

of a revelation by Christ, but I cannot understand or respect, or have any feelings, but those of astonishment and indignation, at any man's indifference to the fact, or to the solemn pretensions to the fact, made in so august a manner by the New Testament. Nor can I feel anything but scorn for the intellectual weakness, that does not perceive that the simple, single fact that God has spoken by his Son, independently of what he has said, is itself a stupendous fact, capable of revolutionizing the world.

I call that fact the first and fundamental doctrine of Christianity—namely, that God has broken the silence of nature and the ages, and spoken in a miracle to men by his Son. I do not wonder that sober and earnest infidels have directed their keenest scrutiny to this claim, and heaped up their most formidable arguments against it. They have rightly felt that if Christianity is to be refuted, this is the first fact to refute; if its influence is to be abated, this is the great influence to abate. And are Christians to allow this fundamental to become a rolling stone, or a stone of stumbling; to permit, without the greatest and most earnest argumentation, the very origin of Christianity, confessedly obscure, to be pronounced also mythical and incredible? Or is it to be waived gracefully, as a question of secondary importance? Or is it even to be frankly conceded that the worth and importance of our religion are really not affected by its origin, or want of origin? I believe I appreciate the worth of those spiritual affections which cling to the moral elements of Christianity, even after its historical truth is denied.

But I cannot understand the indifference which is felt by many to the settlement of a question which seems to me, in logical consequences, the most momentous in all history. The blind impetuosity which has allowed the liberal body in this country to declare this point one of secondary importance, has come near defeating its whole mission; and unless we learn in time that the very essence of Christianity, as a system, lies in the truth of its special character as a divine revelation, and that this fact alone is more pertinent than all the doctrines of orthodoxy put together, to the actual wants of humanity, God will take away our sceptre over the future, and give it to another and later-born body of reformers, who shall not have been seduced from the fundamental fact of revelation, by the sophistries of a shallow materialistic science—the vanities of modern transcendental philosophy, or the crotchets of a self-conceited textual criticism.

This point settled, that God has spoken by his Son, the next fundamental inquiry is, Who is his Son? And the church has distinctly and emphatically, with a fitting sense of the necessity of some positive and definite reply upon this point, answered, Christ is very God! A courageous answer indeed! and, considering the majestic offices, the solemn facts, the stupendous works, connected with Him—considering the comparative infancy of speculation, and allowing for the looming of time—considering the wants of the world in the earlier epochs—not so strange an answer, and in spirit not so injurious and false an answer, as it might be now deemed. Such

an answer now, if the question were for the first time raised, would be simply impossible. The whole habits of our modern mind, our knowledge of history, of science, of the human soul, of God's natural attributes, would utterly forbid it. But, made when it was made—made at first in a metaphorical sense, and in accordance with the laws of the Platonic philosophy—guarded, as it was, in scholastic phrases, from bald literality, and carefully veiled in metaphysical drapery—only gradually hardened into prosaic fact—it is not strange that it prevailed: nor, considering the office Jesus held, which was to stand for God, and teach men God's character, by the exhibition of his own, not so injurious as errors and falsities are, when not carrying some grains of truth in their husks. But the time has come when the alleged Deity of Christ is the great embarrassment and stumbling block of rational faith; for it has complicated itself with a whole system of ingenious error, which, by degrees, has come to pass throughout Christendom for the positive, revealed system of the Gospel; so that absolutely just what the Gospel means, in the estimation of ninety-nine out of a hundred persons, is the alleged plan of salvation, made necessary by the ruin of the race in Adam, the curse of God, the mediatorial death of an infinite sacrifice, and the appropriation of the merits of Christ, by his believing and trusting disciples. This is the very system which I have before shown is now falling into disuse among orthodox teachers—denied here in part, neglected in part there—explained away, modified,

kept out of sight, or brought partially into view, as men can bear it, but practically abandoned by the most successful and most welcome teachers of the popular faith.

Now if this system be the Gospel, if it be Christianity, it is a most stupendous and most awfully important system of faith—one which he who believes it not only has no right, but could not possibly wish, to conceal or withhold, or for an instant to substitute anything in its place. I cannot wonder that those who deny it should be called, nay denounced, by those who receive it, as infidels. I cannot wonder that it should assert for itself the exclusive title of evangelical. My only wonder is that any man believing it should not make it what the hermits of Mt. Lebanon, the early Crusaders, the Inquisitors of Phillip II, (whose noble historian lay so recently dead in the chosen abode of our faith, himself one of the chief ornaments of our religious body, and of the city that had uprightness of heart and clearness of knowledge enough to revolutionize its faith, when it discovered the error of the popular creed), the Calvinists of Geneva, and the Puritan fathers made it—the sole, solemn and all absorbing business of life, to proclaim it in every ear, to arrest every eye to it, and to stop, as far as might be, all the other business, much more all the pleasures of life, to secure the monopoly of the human mind for its sole real interest! But how not only this is not done, but a system practically so negligent and oblivious to it, is taught in the places where this creed yet claims to be believed, and is still read from time

to time at Communion tables, and on other solemn occasions, is, to me a matter of the most serious astonishment, and of the most curious speculation, as to the manner in which the intellectual and moral honesty of the parties is preserved, who lend themselves to this seeming theological duplicity.

Can the moral integrity, can the spiritual honor, can the Christian faith of the world, stand this equivocation and inconsistency much longer? I have too much respect for the conscience of man to believe it. I fear one of two things—as the necessary result of this suspended animation of the old theory—this indifference to Christian doctrine: either the galvanic revival of the system, under a returning sense of the necessity of uniting the morality and conduct of Christendom with its alleged theology—or a sudden rush into rationalism, with a total abandonment of Christian faith and church institutions. Both tendencies are already apparent to the nice observer—on the one hand a tendency to re-assert without qualification the most offensive articles of orthodoxy—as appears in the grave and able tracts put forth by the author of the *South Side View of Slavery*—an honest and brave man, and respectable, in this age of trimmers, for his loyalty to his own delusive creed—a tendency which is felt and indicated by a certain inclination towards Trinitarianism in the weaker and more sentimental portions of our own body, who feel the solitude of our high position—a tendency apparent in such statements as have recently appeared from the pen of the noble and wayward preacher of

Brooklyn, touching the adoration of Jesus, as the only approachable God—and in the revival of Catholicism; and, on the other hand, a tendency to overleap the church pale—to abandon Christian history—to put the Bible among the Vedas and Shasters, and sacred poems of all nations; Christ with Mahomet, Confucius, Menu, and the rest, and fall back upon Natural Religion—a tendency which is perhaps even stronger than the other. I know no reason why both these tendencies may not operate, and all the more precipitately for feeling each other; but I see the real Church of Christ, and the real faith of the Gospel torn asunder by their mutual antipathies—and our Lord again crucified between two murderers. I declare I do not know which to dread most, absolute infidelity, or a return to mediæval creeds. My reason goes more with one; my affections with the other; my intellect here, my imagination there; my whole manhood with neither.

What is to withstand both these alarming and destructive tendencies? Is it not a definite and demonstrable theology? Is it not an account of Christianity, which shall show that its actual teachings, its real doctrines, are entirely consistent with reason while they continue based upon revelation? Is it not the presentation of a definite and positive theology, which is Scriptural, rational, intelligible—in which doctrine leads to practice, and purifies and nourishes instead of weakening and embarrassing faith? Shall we not show the world that Christ is not God in any honest sense of that word; that he

himself never claimed to be God, and was never declared to be very God by his disciples—and that scientifically, spiritually and morally, it is impossible that he should be God; but that he *is*, nevertheless, *God manifest in the flesh*—that is, God's truth, character and will, made known in the life, teachings and temper of one specially set forth to be the Saviour of the world? Shall we not unfold a positive, definite and demonstrated theology, touching the original imperfection of man—his gradual education by Providence under the old dispensation—his ripening for the second—the coming of Christ to supply his new wants in the fulness of time—the establishment of the Christian Church as his shelter from the perils of the world—his personal dependence on its help and teachings for his moral and spiritual safety—with all that intelligible, coherent and simple system of opinion, developed and matured by our Unitarian fathers—but so often ignored, neglected, and forgotten by their degenerate sons?

My brethren, a more definite and positive acquaintance with our own precious faith—a clearer hold on its fundamental articles—a more steady use of it in our own religious growth, and in the education of our children—a more conscientious reverence for distinct opinions—a more guarded resistance to vagueness and rashness of speculation—a deeper sense of responsibility in reference to the theories of faith that surround us—a more solemn conviction of the singularity and grandeur of our own mission—a new and bolder proclamation of our own Uni-

tarian faith—a more methodical and persistent plan for its spread—these are the lessons to which our reflections are designed to lead.

On a day of such religious joy as this, throughout the Christian world, a day that celebrates the resurrection of our Saviour, I need not say how much more congenial to my feelings some strictly spiritual theme would be than that which has occupied our attention; but the circumstances under which we are met, have required the sacrifice of sentiment to duty, and made the topic we have discussed appropriate and imperative. Let us, however, feel that it is a blessed augury, that this new Christian Church is planted in our Saviour's broken tomb; that it dates from his resurrection, that its opening service celebrates his triumph over death, and acknowledges him as the risen Christ, the supernatural founder of revealed Religion. May the sweet bells that rung in this Easter morning never jangle in the ears of this people. May the mingled flowers that adorn your altar—the white imaging the pallor of the lately dead, the red the reviving life of the newly risen—never wither—but continually re-appear in the simplicity of your faith, the purity of your doctrine, the unity of your fellowship, the bloom of your graces, the odor of your sanctity!



